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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

5 July 1985

China: The Tactical Nuclear Challenge [redacted]

SUMMARY

Beijing recognizes that its arsenal of strategic missiles provides China few nuclear options, short of an attack on a Soviet city, if Moscow uses tactical nuclear weapons in an otherwise conventional conflict. [redacted]

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[redacted] circumstantial evidence suggests that China is working to develop its own tactical nuclear weapons. If Beijing makes a sufficient commitment of resources, we believe that within the next three years the Chinese could field new theater nuclear missile units for use against easily targeted Soviet military facilities along the border. [redacted]

Initially, these units probably will be equipped with [redacted] medium-range solid propellant missile [redacted] and within five to ten years will receive shorter-range ballistic missiles. This new theater nuclear force would increase China's options in responding to tactical nuclear strikes. But we believe it will take at least a decade for Beijing to develop the full range of advanced tactical nuclear weapons that would allow it to respond to every level of Soviet nuclear escalation. [redacted]

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 5 July 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Defense Issues Branch, China Division, OEA, on [redacted]

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A Need for a Theater Nuclear Force

We believe the Second Artillery Corps provides China with the ability to retaliate to a Soviet strategic nuclear attack but is incapable of performing limited theater or tactical missions. It consists of a few ICBMs and 60 to 120 medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles that could not be easily shifted from their current targets--enemy industrial and population centers--to strike relatively small military facilities. The Chinese Air Force lacks the high-performance aircraft needed to deliver nuclear weapons to a battlefield or behind enemy lines in the face of modern Soviet airpower and ground based air defenses. And although the Chinese have the capability to build atomic demolition munitions (ADMs), these weapons are difficult to emplace quickly or in combat and may not be in the right place when they are needed. In sum, China's current nuclear-capable forces do not provide Beijing with a flexible tactical nuclear capability.

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Beijing appears cognizant of the limitations of its nuclear arsenal of strategic missiles and is at least contemplating the development of tactical nuclear capabilities.

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Chinese military thinkers over the past decade. These writers argue that China's nuclear forces do not deter tactical nuclear war because they cannot be used effectively for retaliatory strikes in kind for Soviet use of tactical nuclear weapons during an invasion of China.

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Beijing's interest in developing theater nuclear forces probably stems in part from the adoption of a new, more aggressive defense strategy for northeastern China. The new conventional strategy is aimed at engaging Soviet forces in heavy conflict before they approach major industrial and population centers and depends on the concentration of Chinese infantry divisions in relatively forward positions.¹ The Chinese probably realize that this revision of Mao's "luring an enemy in deep" strategy could provide the Soviets with a battlefield dilemma; if faced with a slowed or even stalled advance along certain invasion corridors the Soviets--to maintain the offensive--might resort to tactical nuclear strikes early in the conflict to obliterate China's dug-in defenders.

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[redacted] We expect that by 1995, a more mobile solid-propellant SRBM will be ready for use and by then the Chinese may even have developed enhanced radiation weapons or nuclear artillery as well. In this manner, within a decade Beijing may have developed a full-range of advanced tactical nuclear weapons with which to attempt to deny potential Soviet gains at every level of nuclear escalation. (S NF)

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Nonetheless, for the foreseeable future Soviet tactical nuclear capabilities will remain overwhelmingly superior to China's in numbers of weapons, flexibility, performance, readiness, and training. New theater missile units will, if deployed, enhance China's ability to retaliate against Soviet military targets without catastrophically escalating the level of conflict. They will, therefore, complicate Soviet nuclear planning and increase the risk Moscow would face in using nuclear weapons in China. [redacted]

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Control of New Missiles

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When the Chinese deploy theater nuclear units, we believe that Beijing will place tactical nuclear weapons under the control of regional military commanders instead of the Second Artillery Corps--China's strategic ballistic missile force. [redacted]

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[redacted] Such a deployment scheme is consistent with US and Soviet practices and would make the tactical nuclear forces far more responsive. These units would train with the ground combat armies they would support and give regional commanders the means to respond promptly to shifting conditions in combat. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, we are certain that, as is the case with US and Soviet theater nuclear forces, all of China's nuclear weapons still will be tightly controlled by the highest levels of authority. [redacted]

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